



CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374

Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

Volume 13 | (2011) Issue 3

Article 3

Discourses and Models of Intermediality

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Recommended Citation

Schröter, Jens. "Discourses and Models of Intermediality." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1790>>

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Volume 13 Issue 3 (September 2011) Article 3
Jens Schröter, "Discourses and Models of Intermediality"
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/3>>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011)
Thematic issue *New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice*.
Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Asunción López-Várela,
Haun Saussy, and Jan Mieszkowski
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/>>

Abstract: In his article "Discourses and Models of Intermediality" Jens Schröter discusses the question as to what relations do different discourses pose between different "media." Schröter identifies four models of discourse: 1) synthetic intermediality: a "fusion" of different media to super-media, a model with roots in the Wagnerian concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* with political connotations, 2) formal (or transmedial) intermediality: a concept based on formal structures not "specific" to one medium but found in different media, 3) transformational intermediality: a model centered around the representation of one medium through another medium. Model 3) leads to the postulate that transformational intermediality is not located in intermediality but in processes of representation and thus transformational intermediality is the flip side of model 4) ontological intermediality: a model suggesting that media always already exist in relation to other media. Thus, model 4) suggests that there are no single media but that intermedial relations take place ubiquitously. Schröter comes to the conclusion that one should not start with definitions of media and then discuss intermediality but the opposite: The intermedial field (including the intermedial processes on writing about intermediality) produces definitions of media.

Jens SCHRÖTER

Discourses and Models of Intermediality

The use of the term "intermediality" has become widespread in the last two decades with the recognition that media do not exist disconnected from one another (see e.g., Chapple; Eicher; Prümm; Rajewsky; Wolf). In German-language scholarship where the term — *Intermedialität* — has much currency, appears in 1983 by Aage A. Hansen-Löve (for a bibliography of German-language works on intermediality see, e.g., Grimm), although the term "intermedia" has a longer history: it can be traced as far back as 1812 when it was used by Coleridge (see Sumich) and it has experienced a revival with the 1960s international network of artists, Fluxus. In the 1970s, however, it was the term "intertextuality" introduced by Julia Kristeva — following Mikhail Bakhtin — which attracted attention (on intertextuality, see, e.g., Broich; Hoesterey; Juvan; Pfister; Zander). Here, I do not add new definitions of intermediality; rather, I discuss the discourse about intermediality in the sense of Michel Foucault in order to locate the concept of intermediality in discursive fields as a recurring concept. Thus, I do not define intermediality but ways of talking about "intermediality" in a general context. I present four types of discourse on intermediality: 1) synthetic intermediality: a "fusion" of different media to super-media, a model with roots in the Wagnerian concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* with political connotations, 2) formal (or transmedial) intermediality: a concept based on formal structures not "specific" to one medium but found in different media, 3) transformational intermediality: a model centered around the representation of one medium through another medium. Model 3) leads to the postulate that transformational intermediality is not located in intermediality but in processes of representation and thus transformational intermediality is the flip side of model 4) ontological intermediality: a model suggesting that media always already exist in relation to other media. Thus, model 4) suggests that there are no single media but that intermedial relations take place ubiquitously. Further, a fifth model ought to be considered, that of "virtual intermediality" including the corollary concept of the "politics of intermediality," a model I am developing and thus not ready for inclusion here (see Schröter, "Das ur-intermediale Netzwerk," "The Politics of Intermediality").

In the first discursive field — synthetic intermediality — intermediality is discussed as the process of a (sexually connoted) fusion of several media into a new medium, namely the "intermedium" that supposedly is more than the sum of its parts. For scholars who work in this field, this process is related to some of the artistic movements of the 1960s (see, e.g., Frank; Higgins; Kultermann; Yalkut). These movements reside in the tradition of Wagner and his Zürich writings, i.e., in the genealogical tradition of the artistic synthesis of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Three factors are characteristic for this model of intermediality: a) the condemnation of "monomedia" as forms of social and aesthetic alienation, b) a sharp distinction between intermedia and mixed media, and c) closely connected to the latter, a revolutionary and utopian attitude regarding the triumph over "monomedia" as a social liberation (or at least its preliminary stages) in terms of the return to "holistic types of existence." Dick Higgins — a Fluxus artist — demands of avant-garde art that it should convey "holistic mental experiences" (1). He sees this process as a form of cathartic borderline experience through which conventionalized patterns of perception and behavior of so-called "everyday life" are changed and enriched. He sees the potential of these "fusions" as particularly valid in the "new arts," pointing specifically to Fluxus: "Another characteristic of many of them is that they are intermedial, that is, they fall conceptually between established or traditional media" (15). Since this intermedial fusion is new, it is experienced as a sensual and exciting, refreshing and invigorating, regenerating shift in one's own horizons. Or, as has been put similarly by Marshall McLuhan: "The moment of the meeting of media is a moment of freedom and release from the ordinary trance and numbness imposed by them on our senses" (55). In sum, we can say that for Higgins intermedial art has the function of the breaking up of habitualized forms of perception. This connects Higgins with authors such as Udo Kultermann and Peter Frank, but also with Richard Wagner.

Higgins argues that "The concept of the separation between media arose in the Renaissance" (18). Obviously, his thought is directed at historical considerations in a narrow sense. He describes the Renaissance as a social phase during which the differentiation into different classes fostered the purifica-

tion of media. Regarding this point, Frank follows him but specifies that "this development of separating the arts" (6) is a characteristic of the establishment of the academies of fine arts in seventeenth-century France. Accordingly, the tendency in the twentieth century towards intermediality is, rather, a "re-unification" and not a completely new process. Both Frank and Higgins see the cause for this development in similar social shifts. While, according to Frank, "the era of specializing" is losing its influence and our century is characterized by "simultaneity" (4), Higgins suggests that "We are approaching the dawn of a classless society, to which separation into rigid categories is absolutely irrelevant" (118). This is where the utopian impulse comes to the fore (a good example for the "politics of intermediality"): One of the ideas of traditional Marxism is to overcome the division of labor and its specialization into rigid categories in a classless (communist) society. Viewed in this light, intermedia seem to anticipate the overcoming of that division in the area of the arts — a concretized utopia, and that Kultermann has called the revolutionary "overcoming the borderlines in the arts" (77). One of Wagner's programmatic aesthetic writings is called *Art and Revolution*, where he speaks of the "great Revolution of Mankind" that will bring forth a reconstruction of society continuing where Greek antiquity and its "great work of total art that is tragedy" left off (on this, see Borchmeyer 67). Dieter Borchmeyer suggests that "The disunification and independence of the arts stands in the same relation to modern social 'egoism,' as their unity does to 'communism' ... which is seen as the social ideal embodied in the Greek *polis* and required for the artwork of the future" (67). Consequently Higgins then can accuse "pure" media, especially painting, to be "intended to ornament the walls of the rich" (18).

In my view, the problem with the above positions is the differentiation between "intermedia" and "mixed media." Higgins differentiates between these two forms by suggesting that in "mixed media" the mediated forms meeting there can at any time be regarded by the viewer as separate while in "intermedia" or in "intermedial forms" a "conceptual" fusion occurs making it impossible to view only one of its origins. It is, however, peculiar that a form whose name is already hinting at the assembly of different forms, such as "graphic poetry," appears as an indivisibly fused intermedium. If intermedia are old forms that are inextricably blended in a new form, then its scholar-viewer can hardly succeed in naming the original forms from which the intermedium is generated; if he/she does succeed at all, then the price would have to be paid to (textually) divide it into the original media which then would directly lead to negate the unity of the intermedium. Thus I argue that the term "media synthesis" or "fusion" makes sense only if it is regarded as a spatio-temporal simultaneous presentation and reception of different media forms in an institutionalized frame. The "synthesis" thus lies less in the intermedium itself, but rather in its perceptive and cognitive assimilation.

With regard to the second discursive field I term formal (or transmedial) intermediality, Jürgen E. Müller has summarized as the difference between the concept of intermediality delineated as synthetic intermediality and the discourse when confronting Higgins with the problem located in "the intermediality of artworks between different media and not within specific media-contexts ... In the medium 'film' concepts and principles of other media are made into subjects and are aesthetically realized as well as the concepts of film are realized in other media" (133). These concepts and principles are separated from the material basis of the media; thus, they can be seen as relatively autonomous — and in this sense they are transmedial, although they can only actualize within a media substratum. For example, Joachim Paech suggests that "there is no intermediality between literature and film; there is one only between media narrating literarily or cinematically" (335). This formulation implies that the transmediality of narration, as a *tertium comparationis*, opens up the relationship between the two media without being able to be assigned to one of the two as a specific characteristic. As Seymour Chatman remarks: "One of the most important observations to come out of narratology is that narrative itself is a deep structure quite *independent of its medium*" (117). Fictionality, rhythmicity, planimetric structures, or seriality could also be regarded as possible cases of such transmedial structures (on seriality, see, e.g., Sykora). Although these terms do not function on the same level, they nevertheless share a common ground in that they have already all been used in order to compare artifacts made from different media on a more abstract level. I think that Irina Rajewsky's concept of "transposition" would also belong to this discursive field.

I propose that the structures of formal (transmedial) intermediality can be analyzed by using the analytical instruments of neoformalism. David Bordwell argues that we "lack a term for those trans-

media architectonic principles that govern the shape and dynamics of a film" ("Historical Poetics" 375) and that "As a distinction the fabula/syuzhet pair *cuts across the media*. At a gross level, the same fabula could be inferred from a novel, a film, a painting, or a play" (*Narration* 51). Further, Bordwell suggests that "Logically, syuzhet patterning is independent of the medium; the same syuzhet patterns could be embodied in a novel, a play, or a film" (*Narration* 50). Although Edward Branigan also argues that neoformalism consists of "a set of uniquely cinematic techniques" (119), his demonstration of his theory of filmic narration by analyzing the comic (76-83) shows that the narrative or even more simple formal structures of film indeed have a status that makes them usable as a foundation for a comparative study of the transmedial. In this way, formal and structural homologies between artifacts of different media origin can be analyzed with the terminology of neoformalism, namely as "transtextually" (i.e., transmedially) motivated "devices." Further, one has to call to mind that the transmedial level to be studied is of course an abstraction. Foucault's dictum of the "non-place of language" (*The Order* xvi), in which the heterogeneous entries of Borges's Chinese encyclopedia find their joint non-place, is to a certain extent also valid for the construction of "trans"-medial correspondences in the space of theoretical discourse — itself in written form (see Baxandall 28 concerning the problem of the description of images). In this respect one should be careful not to create analogies too fast, for example between cinematographic montage and cubist painting.

It seems that within the framework of the formal (transmedial) paradigm the specifics of media cannot be accommodated any longer without problems. This becomes clear specifically in those types of analyses that on the one hand are based on transmedial common grounds of different media, while on the other they presuppose a hierarchical relation between these media. This hierarchy is always implied when it is maintained that a certain procedure has been "transferred" from one medium to another — for example when talking of a "literarization" of the cinema. On the one hand, the thought of such a directed transfer of a procedure (which is often called "influence"; see Baxandall 102-05) has to assume that the procedure is media-unspecific enough in order to be able to appear in another media context as the same, i.e., as a re-identifiable principle — this being the basis for every transmedial comparison. On the other hand, the procedure has to be media-specific enough in order to still be able to point in its new media context to the medium from which it was "borrowed," or from which it "originates." This paradoxical structure of the idea of a directed transfer of aesthetic procedures (influence) can be found for example in Yvonne Spielmann's work. In her discussion of Peter Greenaway's films Spielmann rejects Bazin's "mediaspecific" differentiation between a centripetal painted picture and a centrifugal picture of a film, arguing — following Deleuze — for "the untenability of an ontological difference between a *centripetal* frame of painting and a *centrifugal* film-screen" ("Zeit, Bewegung, Raum" 57; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). This strategy is necessary in order to call the opposition centripetal/centrifugal a non-specific option for different media, i.e., to state that cinematic and painted pictures can be organized both centripetally and centrifugally (see Spielmann, *Intermedialität*, "Zeit, Bewegung, Raum"). Since the cinematic picture then can appear centripetally as well, Spielmann is able to find an intermedial reference of the transmedial kind in Greenaway: "The film director approaches the spatial concept of perspective painting by stressing the centripetal aspect of the cinematic picture in the composition of the field of vision over the centrifugal one" ("Zeit, Bewegung, Raum" 57). This observation is interesting because if centripetal and centrifugal are characterized as non-specific options for media, why then does a centripetal cinematic picture still point to painting? If after refuting a media-specific difference between film and painting centripetality is no longer an exclusive characteristic of the painted picture, why then should and can "centripetal" be representative for "painting"? Thus, it seems that transmedial discourses and models can only take on media-specificity at the cost of inconsistency as I suggest above. And thus the only solution to this problem might be historical. One could differentiate historical phases in which certain devices of certain forms of art (media) might have dominantly affected other forms of art (media) in a specific way — the term "dominant medium" thus could be made more precise both systemically and historically.

The third discursive field I designate in my framework of models — transformational intermediality — I base on what Philip Hayward terms "re-representation" (1) or what Maureen Turim terms "displacement," that is, the intermedial relationship consists in the representation of one medium by an-

other. It is obvious that the much-discussed "re-mediation" by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin also belongs to this discursive field. It should be noted, however, that it is questionable whether we can talk here of intermediality since the artifact of a certain medium (e.g., a film) does not contain another medium (e.g., a painting) as another but, instead, represents it. A painting in a film or a building on a photograph are no longer paintings or buildings but are integral parts of the medium representing them: they are simply being represented. As such, for example a photograph of a written text would not contain any intermedial relationships: it is simply a photograph that is pointing referentially to a text. The written text becomes an object of representation. Nevertheless, one would obstruct an interesting perspective if, with this argument, one were to skip representation. What I mean is that if photography can point or relate to a written text we are already dealing with a relation between two media. One medium refers to another and thereby it can comment on the represented medium, which would allow making interesting inferences to the "self-conception" of the representing medium. And it can also represent the represented medium in such a way that its everyday, "normal" states of being are defamiliarized or, as it were, transformed.

It is a complicated question from which point onward one can feel justified in speaking of an intermedial representation. The term certainly would be stretched too far if one were to already judge any mention of the word "painting" in a film or in a book as intermedial representation. And also the cases in which paintings in films are being used for scenic or narrative ends (see, e.g., Stelzner-Large) are not pertinent. It must be a representation that refers explicitly to the represented medium, for example in the Crows episode of Kurosawa's *Yume*, in which the protagonist enters paintings by Van Gogh (see Schröter, "Der (digitale) Film"). It is decisive that — despite all differences — the descriptions of such transformations always have ontological implications. For, in order to be able to observe a transformation or a "displacement" as Turim calls it, a knowledge what the represented medium (allegedly) is has to be there, as well as what the representing medium (allegedly) is. Fundamental differences have to be ascertained making it possible to describe what was "added" to the represented medium by the representing medium, i.e., just how it was "displaced." But these differences are the result and not given. This means that we are already on the other side of transformational intermediality that I designate ontological intermediality.

With regard to ontological intermediality, I begin with the question: Do the clearly defined unities we call media and that are characterized by some kind of "media-specific materialities" precede the intermedial relation, or does a sort of primeval intermediality exist that functions conversely as a prerequisite for the possibility of such unities? Viewed from the point of discourse analysis the latter is to be expected. In order to get closer to a response my question, I suggest an experiment: Let us find a definition, e.g., of "photography" by naming those elements that are specific for it. It would be insufficient to determine that "photography" creates square pictures, because the pictures of painting, cinema etc., are also square. But which other aspects should one choose? One should choose exactly those in which "photography" is differentiated from those media that are used as comparisons — and only those. What do "photography" and "painting" not have in common? Just this, namely that "photographs" are indexical pictures. Thus, if they are contrasted with "painting" then photography is a medium that creates indexical pictures. This criterion, however, does not differentiate "photography" from (photographic) "film." In order to perform this differentiation, the different status of the two types of pictures regarding for example *hors-champ* would have to be discussed, and so forth *ad infinitum*. We can see from this that whatever seems to be specific in a given medium depends on "what the others are not" (Saussure 117), i.e., on the (implicit) definitions of other media that have to be used as contrasts. This is one meaning of Friedrich Kittler's thesis according to which new media do not replace old ones but, rather, attribute to them different positions in the system of media (178). This again means that the definition of the "specific character" of a medium requires the differential demarcation from other media; therefore, the terms for other media are paradoxically absolutely necessary for every "purist" and "essentialist" definition and as a result are contained in them as a trace. Thus, every media "being" — as soon as it appears "on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself" (Derrida 13). This ontological intermediality then would not be one that follows the specifics of given, already defined media as for example their synthesis; rather, it precedes them since the terms for the description of a new medium can only be borrowed from already existing language

or can be composed from existing terms into neologisms. Thus, the recourse to metaphors referring to other media such as "visual rhythm," "writing of light," etc., cannot be avoided. One might say that the "essence" of a medium "was fabricated in piecemeal fashion from *alien* forms" (Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 78).

At this point my argument seems to get entangled in a self-contradiction. On the one hand I have underlined that media are determined only relationally and differentially so that, consequently, they do not possess any absolutely constant "being," while on the other hand I insisted on the differential character of constituting meaning within the medium language/writing so that I therefore seem to subject this medium itself to an invariant specificity. However, to a certain extent this paradox of *différance* cannot be avoided since language/writing are the ineluctable prerequisite for the possibility of theory. Language/writing is the realm in which theory takes place. The media about which media theory is writing only appear as intermedial "displacement" in texts — namely, as language and as writing. Thus, ontological intermediality undermines the idea of clearly separated media segments. In this, the ontological and the transmedial intermediality can be compared. Müller notes — without using the term — about the latter: "If a 'medium' entails structures and possibilities of another medium or of other media, this implies that the idea of isolated media-monads or media-types can no longer be sustained" (82). Perhaps all of this means that we have to recognize that it is not individual media that are primal and then move towards each other intermedially, but that it is intermediality that is primal and that the clearly separated "monomedia" is the result of purposeful and institutionally caused blockades, incisions, and mechanisms of exclusion. One can observe such processes clearly, for example, in high modernism and its procedures of constructing "pure painting" (especially if you read the texts of Clement Greenberg on Jackson Pollock and other US-American painters).

In conclusion, I postulate that in each different discursive field (model) of intermediality also the concept of media is different. What is important is to see that one should not start with definitions of media and then discuss intermediality but the opposite: The intermedial field (including the intermedial processes on writing about intermediality) produces definitions of media. The remaining task is therefore to start a differentiated analysis of the politics of intermediality and the politics of the corresponding notions of various media.

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